

De Sales

SPIRITUALITY CENTER

"Inward peace: Spiritual health"



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St. Francis de Sales preached a sermon on the feast of St. Luke on October 18, 1621. His advice is as applicable to all of our lives (in the state or stage of life in which we find ourselves) today as when he delivered this sermon nearly four hundred years ago. "In the spiritual (and religious) life we are all of us doctors and patients in our own cases. We all suffer from defects; we must all try to cure ourselves. There is no end to this process: the healthier we become, the more traces of disease we discover."

There is something of the doctor and patient in us. What should they — what should we — be on the lookout for? "Our spiritual health can suffer from our dreadful habits and wicked passions. These can lead to serious diseases of the soul unless we constantly do our best to keep them in check and cure them..." Much of the secret to enjoying spiritual health comes down to a matter of balance. "The masters of the spiritual life reduce our dangerous symptoms to four: fear, hope, sadness and joy. When one of these predominates, we have disease in the soul."

The key here is to understand that these emotions are not in themselves obstacles to spiritual health. Rather, the problem arises

when one emotion gains supremacy at the expense of the others. Francis continues: "It is very difficult to prevent one or another of them from getting out of hand, so we should not be surprised at the inconstancy and foolishness of human nature. That man over there, who is full of joy today, will be terribly depressed tomorrow. This man here, so trusting and fearless this morning: see him this afternoon, so downcast as to imagine that he is on the brink of hell."

Much of what Francis de Sales seems to be describing are mood swings, often a result of living upon one kind or another of emotional extreme. "All the diseases of the soul can be traced to some derangement in these passions of ours. If we neglect to cure the trouble, the disease can be fatal. The chief remedy is to keep an eye on ourselves, and to try to bring our passions under the control of reason; otherwise, there will be nothing but disturbance and chaos." It is important to note that Francis does not advocate the diminution or elimination of our emotions: he tells us to subject them to, as it were, a 'higher power'. Reason.

Just as "the masters of the spiritual life" identified human passions as the place in which

spiritual disease can take root, these same masters offer the cure of cures: the "antidote of inward peace. This breeds the unruffled calm of mind and heart," observes Francis de Sales, "which was so greatly recommended by the early Christians."

Francis offers us a wonderful image to illustrate the patience and tenacity required to get — or retain — spiritual health. "A beautiful garden is the result of many hours of patient, tireless work. The gardens of our souls require even more care. We must constantly weed out our bad habits and passions. The little upsets and trifles, which constantly disturb our minds, need careful watching. We do not want them to destroy all that is beautiful and good in the flower beds of our souls. Courage is necessary if we are to persevere in the monotonous, back-breaking weeding trying to gain self-discipline, gently keeping our passions under the rule of reason, attempting to preserve our peace of soul. It is a discipline that no one can avoid."

Inside each of us is a beautiful garden. We need to cultivate and prune it in order to give glory to God and be of service to others. Let us daily do this in peace, and thus experience the peace that only God can give.